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Battle of Blue Mills

Charles P. Brown

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BATTLE OF BLUE MILLS

By Captain Charles P. Brown[1]

The 17th of September always takes me back in recollection to the memorable Tuesday afternoon in 1861 when the Third Iowa Infantry got its first real baptism of fire. We had been under fire in skirmishes, ambushes and affairs many times before, but Blue Mills was a bloody, desperate fight for the brief time it lasted. No one participating was likely ever to forget it. Most of its incidents are as plainly impressed on my mind today as though a recent occurrence. Death was as near a neighbor on that afternoon as at any time in the war and until the final "hour and article" will never be any nearer.

On Sunday, September 15, we were at Macon City, Missouri. An early order put the regiment, probably four hundred men for duty, on board a Hannibal & St. Joe freight train and we started west.

The track was rough, and the way that train rocked and rattled along was a caution. We were evidently going somewhere and getting there as fast as possible. About the middle of the afternoon we stopped at Cameron and unloaded. Hastily impressing as many farm teams as were available for our rations, ammunition, and baggage, we put out to the southward. Some miles out, as night was falling, we turned into a meadow (stubble) at the roadside. A convenient haystack furnished bedding, and in a light drizzle of rain we wrapped up in our blankets, in the open air, for the night. I remember awakening in the night with the rain falling on my face, covering it with a corner of my blanket, and dozing off again.

The sky was clear and the stars shining when, in the gray of early dawn, we were up and on the march again. All day we went at a swinging pace, halting for the night at the little hamlet of Centerville about twelve miles from Liberty. Here we got from scouts and Union men reliable information of a Confederate force of several thousand men enroute from St. Joe to Lexington

[1]Captain Charles P. Brown is an honored citizen of Ottumwa, president of the Ottumwa Public Library Board. He wrote this realistic description of the Battle of Blue Mills a few years ago on the anniversary of the battle, and has kindly given us permission to publish it.—Editor.

CHARLES P. BROWN
Sergeant Third Iowa Infantry, 1861.

CHARLES P. BROWN
Sergeant orderly and clerk, Hd Qrs. Sixteenth Army Corps, Gen. S. A. Hurlbut, 1862.

CHARLES P. BROWN
First Lieutenant of Artillery, Third U. S. C. Navy, 1863

and in camp for the night within ten miles of us. We were near enough to hear artillery firing by this command. They easily outnumbered us ten to one. Shortly after midnight we were quietly aroused, silence strictly enjoined, and we again headed south. The roads were getting hilly and led through timber, and the moonless night made it as dark as Egypt.

Lieutenant-Colonel John Scott of our regiment was in command. We had some mounted Missouri Union men, had a six-pounder field piece from a German Missouri battery, and altogether had between five and six hundred men. At daylight next morning, Tuesday, a beautiful bright day, we climbed the long hill leading to Liberty, a Confederate force leaving the place just ahead of us.

Years after the war Colonel Scott, then lieutenant-governor of Iowa, in an address said his proudest recollection of the gallant old regiment was of that morning, when, "With the eye of an eagle, and the tread of a wild stag, the boys closed that heavy march, momentarily expecting to meet a vastly superior force of the enemy."

Under orders of Major-General John Pope, then commanding in North Missouri, a force of three regiments of infantry, one of cavalry, and two batteries of light artillery, was to join us at Liberty at daylight that morning. We were the only ones to reach the point on time, and we had no word from the other commands. We bivouacked on the hill in the north part of the pretty town, and couriers were sent out on all the roads on which the balance of the force was looked for.

The Confederates were under orders from Major-General Sterling Price to join him at Lexington (where he was besieging Colonel Mulligan) with all possible dispatch. General Pope's object was to intercept and detain, fight and defeat this force, and thus relieve Mulligan. About noon Colonel Scott learned that the Confederates were crossing the Missouri at Blue Mills Ferry, about five miles from town. Couriers were again sent out on all the roads over which reinforcements were looked for, with this information, urging the utmost dispatch, and saying we would attack the Confederates and attempt to hold them until help came.

Liberty and Clay County, Missouri, swarmed with secessionists and every move we made was promptly reported to the Con-

federate commander. Waiting until about the middle of the afternoon, Colonel Scott moved out to make the attack. A mounted scouting party, commanded by Lieutenant Call of our regiment, struck the rear guard, or an outpost of the Confederates, in the thick of timber about two miles from town, and was fired on from a thicket and four men instantly killed, and several wounded. This occurred about noon, and when our advance reached the spot the bodies of the dead were laid on their backs, side by side at the edge of the road in plain view as we marched past. Major William M. Stone of our regiment, afterward governor of Iowa, stormed around in an excited manner and tried to prevent the boys from looking at these bodies. It was a ghastly sight, and calculated to unnerve us. We were nearly all boys from 18 to 20 years. But little attention was paid to the major, who was probably the most excited man in command. The youngsters' nerves were all right and steady. Major Stone's theory was correct, but he had too little confidence in his men. Colonel John Scott, as brave and gallant an officer as ever lived, rode quietly past.

Our road led through heavy timber and dense undergrowth of the Missouri River bottoms. One company was deployed—a platoon on either side—in advance as skirmishers, to discover and develop the enemy. The scout and skirmisher usually discovers the enemy when the enemy fires on him from a place of concealment. Owing to the tangle of vines and brush the skirmishers made slow progress, and the head of our column, marching by the flank in the road, kept abreast of the skirmish line. The result was the column, with our six-pounder at the head, found the enemy as soon as the skirmish line did, and at once became engaged.

When the Confederate commander received word of our movement from town he at once began bringing back the men who had crossed the river, and by the time the fight opened had most of his force on our side. We struck a crescent line concealed in a dry run, and received their fire in front and on both flanks, at short range, and our first intimation of the near presence of the enemy was this opening volley. We instantly took to the woods on each side of the road and fought Indian fashion from behind the logs and trees. Company D of which I was a corporal, took the right hand side of the road, just abreast the field

piece, which unlimbered and went into action in the road. Only one shot was fired from the gun, when it was disabled from loss of men and horses shot down, and the gun was retired by hand, the limber with the ammunition chest being left in trees by the roadside.

A moment after firing began the near wheel horse of the gun was shot and fell. The sergeant in charge called for help to clear the horse. I was standing near, and turned and stooped down to help strip the harness, when the horse sprang to its feet. As I raised up a ball, glancing from a tree, struck me on my right shoulder, giving a sharp stinging blow. Thinking it came through, I pulled open my blouse to see where it came out. Finding nothing I turned to Captain Willett, who was near, and pulling my shoulder around, asked him if he saw any blood on it. While he was looking a ball went through his leg at the knee, disabling him and making him a cripple for life.

Finding that I had been struck a glancing blow by a partially spent ball and not seriously hurt, I stepped into the woods at the side of the road and began firing at the red shirts that showed through the brush and smoke. Getting no re-enforcements and finding a strong force pushing past our right and threatening to cut us off, Colonel Scott, after an hour's hot fight, during which we held our ground where the battle began, gave orders to fall back, which was done deliberately and with no pursuit to mention.

Out of about 500 men we lost, in killed and wounded, 120 in one hour of fighting—a very heavy loss. Colonel Scott, on a little roan horse, was in that deadly lane of road the whole time, perfectly cool, riding up and down encouraging the boys. His horse was struck by eleven bullets, and his clothes riddled but no blood drawn on him—an escape simply miraculous.

Captain Willett of our company was severely wounded, and Lieutenant Ole Anderson shot in the temple and left for dead on the field. William B. Miller was killed and many wounded. It was a gallant fight against heavy odds and at a great disadvantage. Miller was a stout, heavy man, about twenty-four, of a sandy complexion, with close curling reddish hair and whiskers, and a full face. Another man in our company who shall be nameless, was a middle-aged Irishman, tall and slim, with a typical Irish face, and brogue, an easy-going, goodnatured fellow. On the way to the fight, Miller told the Irishman he was going to

be shot, keeping up the banter until after we passed the four dead men by the roadside, and Pat was by this time nearly frightened out of his wits. Just before the fight we passed a clearing containing a log cabin and a family in a tall heavy field of corn. The women and children came out to see us march by. About forty rods beyond the corner of the field—in the thick woods—the fight began, and at the first fire Pat took to the field. Those near said he ran through it like a steer, paying no attention to rows, running over hills and breaking down the stalks, and they could hear him until he got through into the woods beyond.

Pat wasn't the only one who took to tall corn. I did not hear or know of the order to fall back, until I found myself nearly alone, and saw a movement to the rear. Then I lost no time getting out. I took the road at a fox trot, when it flashed through my head it was a very dangerous place and I instantly sprang aside into a footpath running by the roadside. Miller came along the road I had just left, the moment I was out of it, and going a little faster, had passed me a few feet, when a charge of buckshot came whistling by. I distinctly heard them strike him in the back and head, saw several blood spots show on his back, he being without coat or vest. He fell backward at full length. I stopped a moment and looked at him and saw him straighten out with a convulsive shudder that I was sure meant death. A man coming up on the opposite side of the road stopped a moment, took a look, and picked up Miller's gun and went on. Satisfied that I could do nothing for him, and realizing it was death to delay, I went on and very soon overtook the command, which was then retiring at a deliberate walk. When the rear was in front of the cabin Colonel Scott, on his little roan, said, "Boys, there are some mounted men at the corner of the field in the road following us. Turn and give them a few shots." Probably twenty or thirty men halted, faced about and fired at the horsemen, about forty rods away. Horses and men fell over each other in the utmost confusion and disappeared in a cloud of dust. That ended the pursuit.

Second Lieutenant Ole Anderson of our company, left for dead on the field, was found to show some signs of life, and was turned over to us the next day by the Confederate surgeon. Nearing Liberty, we met re-enforcements and Lieutenant-Colonel Scott

proposed going back, but it was getting late in the day, and the plan was disapproved by officers who outranked him. Major Stone, mounted on a mule, his long dark beard matted with blood from a scalp wound, bareheaded, with a handkerchief around his head and his face ghastly pale, protested noisily against any renewal of the fight.

Returning to our camp ground on the hill, I went through a convenient henhouse and, for the first and last and only time in my life, robbed a hen roost, taking a setting hen from the nest. The boys laughed at me. They had been through and left the setting hen as not worth while. But she had just begun setting and made a tender stew, as I very distinctly remember.

Lieutenant Anderson lay in the Liberty hospital for three weeks, unconscious, and with only the faintest signs of life. Vitality then very slowly returned, but left him a mental and physical wreck. He is still living at Decorah, Iowa. A young woman to whom he was engaged became his wife and has devoted her life lovingly in caring for him.

There were just thirteen men in our company D for duty after the fight, and of these Sergeant Charles W. Burdick and Corporal Charles P. Brown were the only ones holding any rank. We went on with the regiment to Fort Leavenworth and Kansas City and in October joined the balance of the regiment at Quincy, Illinois.

Major John F. Lacey of Oskaloosa, member of Congress from the Sixth District of Iowa, was a member of Company H, Third Iowa Infantry, and was taken prisoner at Blue Mills.

At St. Joe the Confederates had gone through the stores of Union merchants and got among other things a lot of red flannel shirts, and many of them were wearing them in the fight. A bad mistake, as the red showed through the brush and smoke, making a good mark.

Just before the firing began Corporal Charles W. Gurney of our company handed me a paw-paw, the first I had ever seen. I remember I didn't like the taste, as with the first mouthful came the crashing volley from the concealed Confederate line, which might have had something to do with it. Private Heath, whom we called "Muqua" (Indian name for bear) because he used to scrap with a tame bear at Decorah when the company was organizing, was near me when the battle opened. We were under a

thorn tree and the ground was covered with red apples. "Where are they? I can't see anybody," he said to me. Stooping down he picked up a handful of apples, he handed me some, saying "If we can't see anything to shoot at we might as well eat thorn apples." The thick undergrowth and the powder smoke made it impossible to see the enemy. The only thing was to fire in the direction the bullets were coming from, and that we did.

ECHOES FROM CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

825 W. 4th St., Plainfield, N. J.
April 11th, 1921.

Mr. Edgar R. Harlan,
Historical Department of Iowa,
Dear Friend:

Ever since our mutual friend, George A. Jewett, wrote to me of your desire to have those old catalogues of the Central University of Iowa in your archives, I have been thinking of writing this letter. I have a volume (bound by one who picked up the trade himself) of those C. U. I. catalogues from the '50's to the end of the century. If you would like that volume for your Historical Department I will send it to you with pleasure.

Also I have twenty-eight pamphlets of the ANNALS OF IOWA from January, 1904, to January, 1913, sent to my mother, D. C. A Stoddard first by Mr. Charles Aldrich and then by yourself. Would you like them returned? My mother enjoyed receiving and reading the ANNALS. I think I've read them all through myself and have found much to enjoy as I have never ceased loving "Iowey" where I spent my youth and eight years of my married life. Five of my children were born there and the youngest after four years at Agricultural College of Ames married an Iowa farmer's son who went to France in the late war. He is now county farm manager located in your namesake town, Harlan, Jay Whitson, a Quaker or Friend.

In the old days at Pella, between '58 and '66 we had rhetoricals at the College Friday afternoon. My mother encouraged her girls to put on their "best bib and tucker" and she herself wore her moiga silk (raja now called) dress, in color a yellow brown. As the war soon broke out every one had to economize, in wearing apparel as well as in what we ate. And as school professors